
Transition and Tertiary Education: a case study of Mzuzu University, Malawi

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ABSTRACT This article reviews the role of guidance and counselling in Malawi in reducing dropout and easing the transition of students to tertiary education, as well as in helping them during their time in tertiary education. It begins by identifying key success factors in guidance and counselling services for learners in both developed and developing countries. The article argues that the provision of viable secondary school careers guidance and changes to the university counselling programme could reduce the dropout rate and create a smoother transition for students during tertiary education with a positive impact on learning progression. The rationale for integrating guidance and counselling between school and tertiary provision is then explored. Drawing on case-study research carried out at Mzuzu University (MZUNI), the article presents findings on the preparation of students at secondary school for university education, the relationship of subjects offered at secondary school to courses pursued at university and the challenges faced by students as they start university and progress through the levels. The article concludes with some recommendations for enabling smoother transitions through the integration of school guidance and counselling in learning institutions.

Introduction

According to Härtel (2001, p. 20), making well-timed decisions about educational pathways that meet individual preferences and aptitudes 'as well as career developments has become ever more important' because of the changes in the world of work and the education system. These changes are resulting in a growing need for adequately resourced career information, guidance and counselling. Despite this need, there appears to be a lukewarm approach to careers guidance in secondary schools, and to counselling services at university level (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2008). The failure to provide such programmes may be impacting adversely on transition to tertiary education and on students' experiences during tertiary education in Malawi. This study therefore seeks to explore issues of careers guidance in secondary schools and counselling services in universities related to transition, based on a case study of Mzuzu University. The growing number of dropouts in tertiary education due to unsatisfactory academic performance has prompted the following questions: Are most students ready and well prepared for tertiary education when they join the university? Do institutions realise the importance of guidance and counselling within their schools and colleges? Do institutions regard guidance and counselling services as an integral part of the education and growth of every young person? The following are three examples of problems that may affect retention. (1) There appears to be a lack of articulation between standards and/or qualifications during transition; for example, it is generally assumed that the entry qualifications into university (i.e. Malawi School Certificate Examination [MSCE] and university entrance examinations) have a predictive validity on performance of students at university. (2) There appear to be poor connections between courses at secondary education and those at tertiary level in terms of both the depth of content and forms of instructional delivery. (3) There is an emphasis placed on the cognitive levels of learning abilities. While secondary school

education emphasises concrete cognitive processes (i.e. knowledge, comprehension and application), tertiary education emphasises abstract cognitive processes (i.e. analysis, synthesis and evaluation). Thus, this study seeks to find out whether secondary school students are prepared for university education, what the transition challenges faced by them are as they join university, how they cope with them and what could be done to improve transition.

Provision of education in Malawi is based on the key guiding principles of access, quality and relevance. Access can only be meaningful if retention and quality are maintained in educational institutions (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2008). To try to address access, the Malawi government implemented the following measures: Provision of Free Primary Education (FPE) in 1994 in order to provide access to education to all Malawian children (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2004); Girls' Attainment of Basic Literacy Education (GABLE); enforcement of readmission of pregnant girls into schools; the practice of affirmative action in the selection of girls for tertiary education and equitable access into public universities through government intervention. Some of the major challenges identified in the 2008-2017 National Educational Sector Plan (NESP) document under higher education are related to the throughput and drop-out rates. One of the three thematic areas of intervention during the ten-year period of the current National Education Sector Plan is to improve the quality and relevance of education in order to reduce drop-out and repetition and to promote learning. There is some evidence from students to suggest that information advice and guidance (IAG) has a positive impact on participation in learning (Hughes & Gratton, 2009). In the context of this article, IAG and career education guidance (CEG) are being used interchangeably as interventions suitable for secondary education, with counselling as an intervention at tertiary level assuming that students have had intensive IAG and CEG at secondary school education.

MZUNI is one of the two public universities in Malawi. The number of students who were withdrawn due to poor academic performance between 2009 and 2011 was 103. This figure represents about 5% of the whole student population at the university. Most of these students (70%) dropped out in the first and second year of their studies. With this large number of dropouts, it appears that a radical intervention at transition is needed. Davis (1999), cited in Hughes and Gratton (2009), notes that improvements to IAG services could form part of a successful interventionist strategy.

At tertiary levels (university and vocational education) it has been observed that general expert guidance and counselling services are either non-existent or ineffective and that there is a need to strengthen links with general education on career guidance and counselling (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2008). Smith et al (2009), cited in Hughes and Gratton (2009), suggest that the integration of careers education programmes with guidance provision and with the wider curriculum is a key factor in determining the effectiveness and impact of CEG in young people's skill development and transition.

The Primary School Leaving Certificate Examination (PSLCE) is used in the selection of students for secondary school. The transition rate is less than 20% (Maluwa-Banda, 2003). Students are admitted into various government secondary schools through a government-initiated selection system that is based on the PSLCE. These examinations are conducted in all primary schools across the country after eight years of basic education. Students do not choose the secondary schools they would like to attend. Depending on ability, students are placed in government boarding secondary schools (for the highest ability), followed by government day secondary schools and then community day secondary schools. Students gain entry into grant-aided and mission private secondary schools through interviews and/or entrance examinations. Nevertheless, most private secondary schools admit students both on the basis of merit, and on their ability to pay fees. Whether PSLCE is a proper instrument for the selection of students into secondary schools is debatable and research is needed to probe this process, but it is necessary to ensure that the criteria that are used for selection into the limited secondary school places are both efficient and fair.

The entry requirement for admission into public universities is the Malawi School Certificate of Education (MSCE), and this is only possible with at least three credits, including English Language. Qualifying students normally respond to advertisements for admission into the universities, which appear in the newspapers. The students complete application forms for both public universities (the University of Malawi and Mzuzu University). The University of Malawi

(UNIMA) administers entrance examinations to the qualifying candidates but MZUNI does not. In future, the newly enacted Public Universities Council may administer this process.

This study will start with an overview of guidance and counselling services and contextualise their expected roles at secondary and tertiary education levels. This will be followed by an outline of the study's findings and finally by a summary of recommendations.

An Overview of Guidance and Counselling

There are many definitions of guidance and counselling. For instance, Hough (1996, p. 2) defines counselling as an engagement in which 'one person elicits help of another in order to deal more effectively with a problem or problems currently experienced'. The Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners (2002) defines guidance as advice about what one should or how one should behave. The South African Research Council (HRC), cited in Chireshe (2006), defines guidance as a process of bringing students into contact with the world of reality in such a way that life skills and techniques obtained allow them to direct themselves to the world of work in order to survive effectively. However, in the context of this study, Newsome et al (1973, p. 3) state: 'Counselling as we understand it, whether it is in school or higher education, is essentially concerned with often neglected areas of growing persons in education.' Such neglected areas are attempts to skilfully assist students to freely explore their feelings in order to be able to cope more effectively with decision-making as they examine their values and objectives.

Integration of Guidance in Secondary Schools and Counselling in Tertiary Education

Counselling is increasingly seen as becoming an integral part of education necessitated by the dynamic characteristics of modern society, such as its increasing complexity, competition and drop-out rates in universities (Newsome et al, 1973). A UNESCO (2002) report suggested that where there is no counselling, schools lose those students who are not able to cope with specific academic scholarship. Chireshe (2006) argues that the most important function of a School Guidance and Counselling programme is to study individual students in order to discover their abilities, interests and needs, thereby helping them to make effective adjustments to life and give shape to their future plans. In our context, the term 'guidance' will be confined to secondary education, and 'counselling' to tertiary education. Students in secondary schools will be guided on the subjects they should choose to ensure a smooth transition to tertiary level. The subjects they choose at secondary level will in this way act as a foundation for tertiary level. At tertiary level, students will be counselled on how to integrate what they learned at secondary school with what they study at tertiary level to enable them to utilise the knowledge and skills when they leave college. This approach has an advantage of sharing the workload between secondary and tertiary education levels and thereby introducing an element of efficiency into the implementation of the two.

According to Maluwa-Banda (1998, cited in Chireshe, 2006), educational policy in Malawi introduced the School Guidance and Counselling (SGC) programme into all secondary schools in the early 1990s. The Ministry of Education and Culture then officially introduced SGC in reaction to the many social, personal, educational and vocational concerns, issues and problems that had surfaced in the 1990s among secondary school students. Initial attempts to implement guidance and counselling in secondary schools in Malawi started with the assigning of counselling roles to some secondary school teachers. The teachers who were entrusted with this responsibility were only those who had basic counselling skills. Similarly, universities solicited assistance from college chaplains, Deans of Student Affairs and other officers, such as student wardens, as well as lecturers. Staff were involved where they had taken some courses in guidance and counselling at university. The counselling services ranged from dealing with disciplinary issues to assisting students in identifying and choosing suitable programmes in universities. This was similar to 'Life Orientation' in South Africa which, according to Chireshe (2006), 'was made a compulsory subject from Grades 10-12, offered in 2005 to prepare learners to be successful by helping them to study effectively and make informed decisions about subject choices, careers and additional higher opportunities'. Malawi primary school pupils have in their curriculum a subject called 'Life Skills', which serves similar purposes. It should also be noted that Guidance and Counselling is not an entirely new

phenomenon in Malawian secondary schools, but its impact has been minimal, taking MZUNI as an example. MZUNI recorded 103 cases of students who were withdrawn due to poor academic performance between 2009 and 2011 (MZUNI Records, 2012). Most of these students (70%) dropped out in the first and second year of their studies. However, the new 'Life Skills' course in primary schools is being welcomed, judging by the favourable reactions of primary school pupils since its inception. Although many of these approaches were commended for kick-starting the intended processes, it seems they may not be sufficient to meet the growing needs for guidance in secondary schools and counselling in universities.

The first serious attempt to initiate enhanced formal guidance and counselling services in schools in Malawi was in 1997 with the establishment of the Africa Centre for Guidance, Counselling and Youth Development. The centre was made possible by technical and financial support from UNESCO. It originated from the realisation that in many African Ministries of Education, the growing number of social problems that were affecting African adolescents, particularly girls, necessitated the introduction of school guidance and counselling services in their countries (UNESCO, 1998). Thus, several countries made financial pledges to support the programme, including Botswana, Cameroun, Lesotho, Zambia, Mozambique and Namibia. Development agencies such as UNICEF, the United Nations Development programme, the United Nations Population Fund, the Danish International Development Agency, the German Embassy, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Forum for African Women Educationalists and the Rotary Club also made pledges to support the programme. The aims of the Centre were to:

train and develop expertise in guidance and counselling that would help governments in Africa to address issues concerning youths, particularly girls. Special attention will be given to behaviours that are consistent with positive personal development and social cultural and economic development in the region, and generate income from special projects, programmes and consultancies undertaken by the centre in order that it becomes self sufficient. (MANEB, 1997)

Although the region, Malawi included, has made a major advancement in establishing the centre, its full impact is yet to be felt. It has not yet produced adequately trained teachers to cater for the growing needs of guidance in secondary schools and counselling in universities, and hence a gap still exists in these institutions. Full utilisation of the centre's services could go a long way towards meeting the many challenges facing the guidance and counselling services in Malawi today which call for the integration of guidance and counselling for the transition from secondary to tertiary education, and during tertiary education. It can clearly be seen, however, that the need for guidance and counselling in secondary and tertiary education has already been established, together with the structure for training appropriate personnel.

Hamrin and Ericksons (1939) and Kochlars (2003), cited in Chireshe (2006), have observed that young men and women still enter higher education institutions with little knowledge of the courses to be selected and careers to follow. Guidance and counselling by schools have become a systematic effort to improve the quality of students' choices to enable them to choose their careers on an informed basis. In subscribing to the same idea, Maluwa-Banda (1998, cited in Chireshe, 2006) states that in Malawi, secondary school years are important in the adjustment of students because they represent the transition from the comparatively sheltered life in school to the freedom and responsibility of either tertiary education or employment. He further states that almost everything the student encounters is new – 'new teachers, students, curriculum programmes, physical facilities as well as rules and regulations'. Evidently, the new learning environments may be both challenging and threatening, and it may take a while for new students to get used to them. However, with a little help from others, the experiences may be less overwhelming - hence the need for proper initial guidance through the orientation process. Incidentally, the very nature of the demanding courses comprising tertiary education will alone definitely require acquisition of effective study skills right from the beginning if the student expects to survive. Davies (1999), cited in Hughes and Gratton (2009), sees the support the students receive in helping them settle into college at the beginning of their course as a significant factor in student satisfaction, although issues related to the perceived quality of educational experience whilst at college tend to outweigh the influence of other factors, such as financial hardship, on student drop-out. Mwamwenda (1995, cited in Chireshe, 2006) emphasises that transition presents students with problems of an

educational, social and personal nature that call for effective counselling services to enable them to negotiate these challenges. This may also include assisting students with study, note taking, writing and research skills.

Some countries are particularly advanced in their provision of guidance and counselling services, so it is timely and appropriate, as Hughes and Gration (2009) point out, that existing research findings are evaluated for their potential to help consolidate professionals' understanding and assessment of effective policies and practices as well to address existing gaps. For example, Austria has a comprehensive service delivery system, which covers schools, the tertiary education sector and adult education (Härtel, 2001). In schools, the service providers are guided by the School Organisation Act, which explicitly states that 'young people shall be taught and educated with their future careers in mind' - that is, they will be prepared for the world of work (p. 3). There, counselling has become 'an integral part of the school system'. Career guidance, referred to as 'information counselling', is also provided at school level. In addition, there are school psychology departments which fulfil various counselling and guidance needs through the production of relevant services at school level. The Austrian model clearly demonstrates the feasibility of operating a comprehensive guidance and counselling programme throughout an education system starting from basic education (primary and secondary) up to tertiary education. This is the type of approach that this study envisages. The only difference is the idea of confining the guidance aspect to secondary education and counselling to tertiary education. In the adult education sector, career information, guidance and counselling are provided through a comprehensive 'education database'.

Such a model appears to be functional in developing countries such as Botswana and Zambia, where comprehensive guidance and counselling modules have been produced with the assistance of UNESCO to reinforce their guidance and counselling services (UNESCO, 1998, 2000). Having provided the research context, the article now turns to the study.

The Study

A survey approach was used to gather both qualitative and quantitative data on the transition challenges that students face as they move from one academic level to another. Qualitatively, the study focused on the *perceptions* of students from Levels One to Four, and on lecturers and managers of MZUNI. These respondents were considered to be key players in university life who would be conversant with the education system, and good sources of data as they are well informed.

Purposive sampling was used to construct a feasible sample of students and lecturers from one faculty that was easily accessible to the researcher, which was Education. The sample consisted of 40 students who responded to questionnaires and 15 students from the MZUNI Student Representative Council (MUSREC), the student representative body, who were involved in focus group discussions. Twenty lecturers, three deans of faculty, one dean of students and one administrator responded, from the following faculties: Education; Information Science and Communications; Tourism and Hospitality Management; and Health Sciences. MUSREC was included as a crucial student body that deals with affairs of the students at the university. Students at the second, third and fourth levels of university education, on the basis that they were likely to have the most experience of educational transitions, were asked to respond to written questionnaires, as were the lecturers.

Findings

The study sought to discover, first, how much preparation for university education, in the form of guidance, students in secondary schools were receiving. At the moment, Malawi has only two public universities: the University of Malawi and MZUNI. However, there are plans to increase access to higher education by establishing more.

The study found that most students (60%) do not have any choice but to join whichever of the two universities will admit them. However, about half of the student respondents indicated that they did not know which courses were being offered at MZUNI prior to admission. This clearly points to one of the first problems that needs to be addressed to ease the process of

transition. The responses of almost all of the lecturer respondents in the study confirmed this by indicating that, in their experience, most students who enrolled for the first time were not aware of either the courses or the demands of university life and education. These lecturers ascribed this to the inadequate guidance and counselling programmes in secondary schools in Malawi and said that secondary schools in Malawi tended to concentrate their efforts on examinable courses of study to ensure their students achieved good examination results. This finding suggests a second problem in respect of transition – the poor academic preparation that prospective university students are receiving in respect of the subjects they go on to study at university.

The following summarises the findings from questionnaires and group discussions. Newspaper advertisements, friends and former graduates, secondary school counsellors, and parents and relatives, in that order of significance, were the main sources of information about courses offered at MZUNI, as illustrated in Table I.

Source of information	Frequency
Newspaper adverts	24 (58%)
From friends and former graduates	8 (20%)
Secondary school counsellors	4 (10%)
Parents and relatives	4 (10%)

Table I. Sources of information about courses offered at MZUNI.

There were no fully operational and systematic guidance and counselling programmes in secondary schools and hence students entering university lacked proper direction. Most students (70%) chose courses to study at university based mainly on subjects they studied and liked in secondary schools, as illustrated in Table II.

Basis of choice	Frequency
Interest based on subjects students studied and liked very much at secondary school	28 (70%)
Career guidance information at secondary school	4 (10%)
Influence from parents or relatives	4 (10%)
Influence from community role models	2 (5%)
Influence from friends who have studied at Mzuni	2 (5%)

Table II. Basis for the students' choice of the programme of study

Lecturers experienced students facing a number of challenges when they join the university - for example, the assumption that they were now adults and therefore did not need to be monitored as closely as they had been in secondary schools. They observed that students found a significant difference between secondary school and university in terms of the rules and regulations and their enforcement and that they seemed to assume that they were free to do whatever they wanted, such as missing classes whenever they wished. Lecturers regretted that useful subjects, such as Life Skills, offered at primary and secondary schools, were discontinued at university.

For students, the lack of integration between the subjects offered at secondary schools and those offered at university presented a difficulty. They found having to be responsible for their own studies, with lecturers only playing facilitation roles, difficult to get used to. Other concerns were that they were expected to be computer literate, on the one hand, but on the other, computers were not easily accessible at the university. They also found the poor student accommodation hard. Students were asked what secondary schools could do to effectively prepare them for tertiary education. They said that they thought secondary schools should take career guidance more seriously. They could invite lecturers or students from universities to talk about university education and give them information, and also arrange educational visits to universities. They wanted schools to improve the level of education – specifically, the depth at which the subjects were taught - in order to provide a better foundation for university subjects. Secondary schools should teach subjects for knowledge and not merely to enable students to pass the MSCE examination. Teachers should, for example, ensure that they complete the MSCE syllabus with students. Finally, students said they wanted, whilst they were still at school, to be introduced to

subjects offered at university, such as computer studies, elementary psychology, research and reasoning skills. Students found the differences in the relationship between the subjects offered at MSCE and the courses pursued at MZUNI to be significant. This was less the case with, for example, history, physics, chemistry, biology, geography and mathematics

Discussion

The findings in Table I indicate that prospective MZUNI students find information about courses offered at the university mainly from newspaper advertisements. This is understandable as these usually carry updated, detailed and relevant information about courses and programme requirements, enabling prospective students to make informed decisions. Some students find using the university website beneficial as it conveys similar information. These findings are consistent with those of Hamrin and Erickson (1939) and Kochlars (2003), cited in Chireshe (2006). Unfortunately, because not all students have easy access to the two modes of communication described above, some prospective students are likely to consult their friends, particularly former MZUNI students, parents and relatives. The effectiveness of this may be questionable, not least because information garnered in this way can be inadequate and outdated. This underlines the need for university personnel to visit secondary schools to provide the required information.

There was evidence in the study that in some secondary schools, the University of Malawi (UNIMA) has conducted career talks, and responded to invitations to send university graduates and community role models to talk to the students about university life. Students reported that they benefited greatly from the information they received concerning the courses offered at the various colleges of UNIMA and were motivated to work even harder. MZUNI, on the other hand, does not provide career talks to students in secondary schools because the exercise is deemed expensive. One of the objectives of MZUNI, however, is to run outreach programmes in communities. Career talks in secondary schools would be an invaluable service to such communities, especially those close to the university. Secondary schools that are far from MZUNI could benefit from pamphlets, brochures and fliers, the cost of which may not be prohibitive when compared with the potential benefits. This approach has produced commendable results at UNIMA, where it has been practised in the past.

The discussion and ideas expressed above concur with the thinking of Lugulu and Kipkoech (2011), who argue that the decision regarding which degree programme to pursue at university is very important, in that it can determine the career that students will pursue for the rest of their working lives. They add that if a wrong decision is made at the point of decision, then the opportunity should be available at a later stage, through an appropriate guidance service, to enable students to correct any mistakes. This idea emphasises the important roles that secondary schools and universities have to play in the guidance and counselling activities to ensure that students make informed decisions.

It is argued here, therefore, that career guidance is crucial because it helps students make informed choices about what they want to do in life. Student respondents also suggested that secondary schools should start career guidance sessions from Year One to Year Four of secondary school education. Such sessions will help students make informed choices about the programmes they decide to pursue at university. Students also recommended that people with university education who have made notable achievements in life should facilitate career talks. Secondary schools, they said, should have more access to information about universities and different careers in the form of brochures, fliers, leaflets and newsletters. This information is necessary for the motivation of secondary school students, and providing it is something that the outreach programme at MZUNI could do.

When students were asked what secondary schools could do to effectively prepare them for tertiary education, they indicated that they needed to know what takes place at universities before they get selected to start university life. For example, one student in the students' governing body said:

We need to be given information on life at a university through career guidance because careers guidance would enable us choose appropriate subjects. Many of us come to the university

without attending any career guidance at secondary schools and hence we do not know what is expected of us when we join university.

It appears that public universities do not conduct career talks. These are only undertaken by private institutions of higher learning. Instead, students learn about university life from their friends, parents, alumni and students currently studying at universities. Those who do not have access to such information find themselves making choices about the types of degree they want to study in an uninformed way. Under such circumstances, what matters to the students is that they find a place at a university, rather than which course they will be studying. They have little idea about their future careers and the relevant courses they should pursue at university in order to realise their dreams. Therefore, there is a need to sensitise students in Forms 3 and 4 at school about university life. While 'informal sources' of information, advice and guidance, such as parents, friends and media, are important (Hughes & Gratton, 2009), it is up to secondary schools and universities to take leading roles in providing up-to-date and more accurate 'formal sources' of information, advice and guidance.

With regard to students' choice of university course, as illustrated in Table II, it is interesting to note that the majority of students are influenced in their choices by the interest they had in subjects they studied and liked at secondary school. One would expect that the students would make the choices based on information from career guidance and influence from parents and friends who had studied at the university. It is likely that this preference may be based on the belief that they (the students) are likely to do well in subjects they studied and enjoyed at secondary school. This brings into the question the relationship between subjects offered at MSCE and courses offered at MZUNI. Students observed that courses offered at secondary schools and those offered at MZUNI were very different except in subjects such as history, physics, chemistry, biology, geography and mathematics, which were a continuation of the secondary school curriculum. What did not come out clearly from the students were the differences in depth and instructional methods applied at both levels. On the relationship between subjects offered at MSCE and courses they were pursuing at MZUNI, some students indicated that although they found most subjects at university level new, the ones which were similar to their secondary school subjects had had a good foundation laid by the secondary school studies.

In contrast, some lecturers felt that the intellectual rigour in most subjects at secondary school is diluted so that students have problems when they join university. Lecturers suggested that the depth of subjects offered at secondary schools should be increased to provide a better foundation for university education. Ye Yoon Hong et al (2009) observe that although subjects like mathematics in elementary and high school enjoy a special position in the curriculum, the knowledge and skills of students coming to university may not echo this fact. They suggest that a number of changes occur in the transition to tertiary education, including teaching and learning styles, the type of mathematics taught, conceptual understanding, the procedural knowledge required to advance through the material, and changes in the amount of advanced mathematical thinking needed. It may be necessary to review the secondary school curriculum in light of Ye Yoon Hong et al's (2009) observations.

In an attempt to ease some challenges students face when settling down having joined the university for the first time, the university conducts orientation at the beginning of every academic year for new students for a period of one week. Such orientation services are concerned with ensuring that the problems related to transition are reduced (Hartman, 1979, cited in Chireshe, 2006). At MZUNI, the programme introduces students to various activities relevant to university life, designed to enable students to settle and prepare them for utilising university resources effectively. The main aim is to help students adjust and adapt to the university environment rather than providing an academic focus on their work.

The current orientation programme also presents its own challenges. In the first place, it is run only once, when students arrive at the beginning of Level One. No follow up is made to find out how the students are coping with university life. Nothing is done to assist the students who miss the orientation. The study has established that for some presenters, the time allocated to them on the programme is inadequate and inconsistent. Some are given ten minutes while others are given twenty minutes. Under such circumstances, students do not get the important information

they require for their stay at the university. Despite this, students viewed the orientation as a very important exercise.

The need to review current practices in the orientation programme was echoed by many. Suggestions included increasing the duration to two weeks, supplying each student with a Student's Handbook during orientation, the involvement of guest speakers from outside the university, and giving more time to departments to explain departmental-specific issues to new students so that they know what is required of them from their respective departments. As already pointed out by Maluwa-Banda (1998, cited in Chireshe, 2006), the process of orientation is critical in the adjustment of students. Bearing in mind that everything is new, the student will definitely need help in orienting himself or herself to all the new factors. In addition, Brown (1972, cited in Chireshe, 2006) highlights survival orientation as one of the important components of effective school guidance services. This involves a brief session designed to acquaint all new students with their new environments by presenting information about school life and giving them advice on effective study procedures.

On challenges faced by students at MZUNI, some students noted that there was no integration of subjects offered at secondary schools with those offered at university. Such a gap creates transition problems, and this is particularly observed in the first semester as students try to adjust to university life. This problem lessens as students get used to university life. Another major challenge cited by students is that they are expected to be responsible for their own studies, with lecturers only playing facilitation roles. Smith et al (2000) state that students joining college may experience both an initial sense of excitement with their new freedoms but also a sense of apprehension at their new obligations and responsibilities. Many students struggle to find a workable balance between exploring who they are in social terms and accomplishing their academic work.

Computer illiteracy was another challenge, with some students indicating that most came to university with no computer knowledge and yet they were expected to submit word-processed assignments to their lecturers. They were also expected to use the Internet to find information to supplement what they learned in class and for research. Due to the absence of formal computer lessons in many secondary schools, some students learned how to use computers from their friends when they joined the university, suggesting there is the need to introduce computer lessons and information literacy for all new students when they join university. This will ensure that they are computer literate and are able to search for, find and evaluate information on the Internet for their studies. Alternatively, secondary schools should be encouraged to introduce into their curricula formal computer literacy courses which should be examinable. Another major challenge is the accessibility of computers for all students in the computer laboratory, as they are in short supply. Perhaps, as a stop-gap measure, students could be asked to bring their personal laptops from their homes. Currently, most students ask their friends who are computer literate to process their assignments. Other students use information bureaus for the same purpose. Lack of books in the library is another challenge that MZUNI should address.

The final challenge is student accommodation and provision of meals in the cafeteria. Students who are offered places at MZUNI on non-residential status are required to find their own accommodation. It is not easy to find accommodation close to MZUNI that is conducive to learning. Additionally, students get used to staying in hostels on campus, but due to growing enrolment, it has not been possible to accommodate all students, who then find it strange to be asked to find their own accommodation off-campus. The limited space in the cafeteria necessitates queuing for meals, so it takes a long time for students to be served and as a result some miss meals in order to attend classes.

Students' academic progress is an issue. The study found that they are not given information when they join the university or at any time during their stay at the university in respect of the subjects they will take in the Year One to Year Four 'roadmap'. Students know what they will learn during each semester only once they have started it, and not before. Semester course outlines are not provided at the beginning of each semester. Students felt that they did not have enough time to prepare for examinations and suggested that they should be given a week before examinations to prepare. They felt that it was too difficult to finish classes on Friday and start examinations the following Monday. A point of concern for many students was that they perform well in their core subjects but do poorly in non-core subjects such as mathematics, chemistry and physics. Suggested

solutions to this challenge included making non-core subjects optional, with each department teaching its own basic science subjects, and the involvement of guest lecturers in specialised fields, such as health sciences. This would avoid overloading students with courses and mixing students from different departments doing the same course. Students also expressed the need to have more practice in subjects that are practical in nature.

Among the other problems students face at university are family issues and financial and academic problems, particularly academic pressure. Students complained about being overloading with courses, especially in earlier years. The study found that some departments have personal advisors who help students find solutions to their problems but that not all departments have this arrangement. While the university is establishing a fully fledged counselling service with psycho-social specialists, it may be necessary for those departments currently without personal advisors to establish the practice as an interim measure, to help students find solutions to their problems.

The student body (MUSREC) has a Director of Academic Affairs to whom students direct their academic problems. Students can also approach the Senior Assistant Registrar (Academic) particularly with problems associated with examinations and assessment of students' work. In other departments, students take their academic problems to their respective lecturers or heads of department.

With regard to social problems, some students ask their friends for help, and others go to the Dean of Students Affairs. The students' body has different sections which deal with, for example, problems relating to social welfare and special needs. Unfortunately, the sections are manned by students who do not have any counselling background and if students' problems cannot be solved by the student body, they are referred to the relevant authorities in the university, where it seems there is also a lack of professional counselling.

Evidence from the study indicated that most of the students who graduate from MZUNI find jobs, particularly in the education, information science and environmental science sectors, but that there is more that could be done by the university to prepare students adequately for future challenges in their careers. Visits to industry could be organised by the departments, for example, to help their students link theory with practice. In addition, courses that are practical in nature, such as Land Management, need to provide students with more work experience than is currently available to them. The departments also need to ensure they have enough equipment to enable students to gain the necessary hands-on experience before they graduate and that the equipment used in the learning environment is similar to that used in the field, to enable students to acquire transferrable skills. In short, the learning context should be similar to the performance context. Finally, students should also be given more opportunities for work placements in industry when the university is in recess, to enable students to acquire more practical field experience – students on the nursing programme, for example.

What Should Be Done to Improve Transition and Reduce Dropout Rate?

There were a number of suggestions from students on what the university should do to improve transition. More equipment was necessary for sports and recreation, as well as more books for the library, and the students' common room needed to be replaced. There were not enough educational visits to enable students to appreciate what happens in the field, so that they can easily relate this experience to what they learn in class. The university should be proactive in sourcing funds from industry and benefactors to fund more university activities for students.

There was a variety of reason why students dropped out. These included students' realisation that they were no longer interested in the courses they were pursuing, failing the examinations, pregnancy and failure to pay fees, but the main reason for drop-out was poor academic performance. This scenario could easily be avoided by pre-entry guidance alluded to earlier on by Martiney and Munday (1998, cited in Hughes & Gratton, 2009). Students are unlikely to withdraw or drop out of courses related to their personal career goals.

Students emphasised that it was time the university addressed students' concerns. It should prioritise the purchase of learning and teaching materials and ensure that resources increased in line with rising student numbers. Students wanted to be informed whenever there were problems

in the institution but they did not want to be given the information in an intimidating manner in an attempt by the university to reduce incidences of strike and riots.

Careers guidance programmes in secondary schools should not be optional, as is the situation today. The programme should be an integral part of the curriculum and even assessed. The introduction of 'Life Skills' into the primary school education curriculum in Malawi is a step in the right direction. In universities, an extension of the orientation programme should be an ongoing feature, and development of psycho-social specialists could be seriously considered.

Conclusions

Using the findings from a case study carried out at MZUNI, this article has reviewed the roles of careers guidance and counselling in Malawi in reducing drop-out and smoothing the transition of students to tertiary education as well as in helping them while they are undergoing tertiary education. Out of its findings, the following recommendations are put forward for consideration here:

There is need for a radical intervention in the way transition to tertiary education in Malawi is managed as well as in the way students' experience of tertiary education is managed. Fulfilling the potential of the existing Africa Centre for Guidance, Counselling and Youth Development could resolve many of the challenges facing guidance and counselling services in Malawi today, particularly in the area of service provider training. In trying to address the gaps in its programme, Malawi could benefit from research findings and from the experiences of other countries.

Careers guidance and counselling need to be integrated into the existing ongoing courses in secondary schools, such as 'Life Skills' and 'Social Studies', and become examinable in order to ensure they are treated seriously. At university level, elements of counselling could be infused through discourses in subjects such as psychology.

To reduce withdrawal and drop-out at university level, a rigorous pre-entry guidance programme could be implemented through a comprehensive orientation programme.

Finally, the orientation programme could be an ongoing feature augmented with the expertise of psycho-social specialists and more trained personnel from the existing Africa Centre for Guidance, Counselling and Youth Development.

In conclusion, it is recommended that careers guidance and counselling should be integrated in secondary schools and institutions of higher learning to provide students with a smoother transition, assisted by qualified counsellors to help them find solutions to their personal, social and academic challenges.

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